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ABSTRACT

Several aspects of living and teaching in Czechoslovakia are presented from the point of view of a 1983 Fulbright lecturer at Comenius University in Bratislava. Included are a brief history of Czechoslovakia, details of the University degree program, time commitment expected of instructors, observations on Czechoslovakian students and Vietnamese immigrants, and on a totalitarian society in general. (BZ)

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TEACHING ESL IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

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Teaching ESL in Communist Czechoslovakia

My time spent as a Fulbright lecturer at Comenius University in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia was a richly rewarding experience. Although the term "richly rewarding" may sound like a platitude to many, it is a term that I have come to believe to be true--after having had ample time for reflection. This paper will discuss several aspects of living and teaching in communist Czechoslovakia: the history of the country, the faculty and university, the students and the curriculum, and some miscellaneous information about living in a totalitarian country. In order to understand Czechoslovakia today, it is first necessary to go back in time to explain some recent history and its effect on the life of modern day citizens.

Part I: History

In 1918 Czechoslovakia was formed from three former Austro-Hungarian principalities: Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia. But from the very beginning, Slovakia has always been considered the country bumpkin by the more sophisticated Bohemians and to a lesser degree by the Moravians. At the end of World War I, the First Federal Republic was created, and its constitution was considered by many to be based on the best aspects of the French and American constitutions. From the creation of the first republic to World War II, Czechoslovakia enjoyed one of the healthiest democracies in Europe and was considered by many to be one of the most industrialized. All this was soon to change.

In the period between 1946 to 1952, the communists completed their takeover of Czechoslovakia. In the 1946 elections, about 36% of the vote went to the communist party; however, since this was the largest percentage won by any party, the communists were able to force President Benes to form a government with communists predominating. After Benes finally resigned, the socialization of all industry, retail stores, utilities, agriculture, schools, and churches was completed. During the 1950's charges and counter charges of treason were rampant as the communists strove to strengthen their grasp over the entire society. It was a time of political trials, of executions, of imprisonment, and of lives changed unalterably for the future.

During the 1960's the socialization policies led to a dropping off of agriculture and industrial production. And where Czechoslovakia had enjoyed one of the highest industrialized societies between the great wars, now the economy was so troubled that shortages of food and other goods became common. Members of the party began criticizing the government, intellectuals called for more freedom, and Slovaks renewed their efforts to gain recognition for Slovak rights. Dubcek became president and introduced liberal reforms including freedom of the press and speech as well as increased contact with non-communist countries. This period in Czechoslovakian history is known as the "Spring between Two Winters."

The liberal air created consternation among the other Eastern Bloc countries, but especially in Russia. Consequently, in 1968 Czechoslovakia was invaded by Russia, Bulgaria, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland. Russian troops are still in Czechoslovakia today. Thousands of people who were active in the reform movement were either imprisoned or forced from their jobs--especially those intellectuals on the faculties at Czechoslovakia's six universities. (It's interesting to note that it is a crime not to have a job; therefore, those who were forced out of the positions could, legitimately, be imprisoned for not having a job.) Hušak became president and cancelled most of Dubček's reforms.

Today Czechoslovakia is the most ardent supporter of Russia in the Eastern Bloc. Its government is the most repressive and paranoid of all East Bloc countries, which is important to remember when reading the discussion of relationships between foreign lecturers and faculty members. Although there was hope in the late 60's for a more liberal stance on communism, today that hope is gone, crushed by the invasion of the USSR. Czechoslovakia in the 1980's has reverted to a police state in which there are few personal freedoms.

Also gone is the hope that flourished between the great wars that Czechoslovakians would reap the benefits of a highly industrialized society. Czechoslovakians today carry goodly sums of money on them at all times because they are afraid of seeing a hard-to-get product and not having the money to pay for it. There are no long lines for food, but there are shortages. And, living in Czechoslovakia in the winter is like going back in time thirty years--no fresh green vegetables, tomatoes, or fruit. Indeed, the main winter staples for most are sauerkraut, pickled paprika, onions, potatoes, carrots, lemons, and apples. A wise axiom to remember is: if you see it, buy it, for you might not get a chance again soon.

Part II: Teaching English as a Second Language in Czechoslovakia

The English Department at Comenius University. Comenius University is the largest university in Slovakia and is located in Bratislava, its capital. It is not as well known as its sister institution, Charles University in Prague, but is nearly as prestigious. There are usually about 18 full-time faculty members in the English Department with one British lecturer (British Council) and one American lecturer (Fulbright). The department offers courses in American/British literature and history, linguistics, methodology, and phonology. Generally, the faculty are quite competent in English, but individual fluency varies with the amount of time the person has spent abroad in an English-speaking country.

There are classes for 40 minutes, 80 minutes, and 120 minutes, but most classes are for 40 minutes. Each faculty member is responsible for teaching up to 15 classes per week in

addition to their other responsibilities; most consider 15 classes per week a normal load. Other responsibilities include scheduling regular classes and extra-mural classes, writing reports about various classes, supervising diploma theses, and for those lucky enough to be party members (a privilege, not a right), going to weekly party meetings. And, finally, a very common task for faculty members is to write textbooks for all ages and to translate books from English into Czech or Slovak. Each faculty member is responsible for two office hours per week.

A diploma is issued after five years of study in one of the following areas: Slovak-English, Russian-English, German-English, and, at one time Arabic-English. Concentration at Comenius is on Slovak whereas at Charles University, the concentration would be on Czech. The students learn these combinations for one of the following purposes: to be a translator, teacher, or librarian. So, any permutation is possible: Slovak-English librarians or teacher, for example, or Russian-English translators, librarians, or teachers.

Each year the schedule remains about the same and looks something like the following:

Winter Term:

Classes begin	mid September
Započet week	mid week of December
Classes end	end of December
Examinations	from end of Dec. to first of Feb.

Recess	2nd week of February
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Summer Term:

Classes begin	3rd week of February
Započet week	middle of May
Classes end	3rd week of May
Examinations	end of May to beginning of July

Foreign faculty members are not usually required to give a final examination. The catalog, which is published after classes begin, indicates which classes require an exam. Other classes merely require a započet, or signature of the lecturer attesting that the student has successfully completed the term. Usually the započet is given for completing assignments and coming to class. Failure to get a započet can result in expulsion for the student. The students are given a small book, quite like a savings book from a bank here in the US, in which to record five years of zapoçets. No second započet book is issued; consequently, students guard their books with their very souls.

Lecturers are not given a class roster, so they must obtain a list of the students in each group from the class leader who usually knows all the names in the class since they remain together as a group throughout their university careers.

Classes and Students. Each class has two weeks of brigade work in the fall term during which the students pick potatoes, can fruit, or work in some sort of factory. The students also have two weeks of winter sports sometime during the winter months. No memos are given to tell the lecturer which classes students are going to be missing so one must ask the students--if you can find them. It's also not surprising for other events to intervene upon the class schedule. Some classes visit local schools, go skiing or do some other winter sport as physical fitness is considered of vital importance, or listen to special lectures given at their hostels on important days such the Bulgarian-Czechoslovakian Friendship Day or International Women's Day. The only attitude a foreign lecturer can take in the face of interruptions to class schedules is: "So be it!"

On International Women's Day the year I was in Bratislava, a very nice and, as usual, unexpected event occurred. I had gone to my classes as usual, being warned by some of my colleagues on the faculty that my students might not show up, and true to forecast, my first class did not appear. When I went to my second class for the day, I had resigned myself to the inevitable and when I saw only three shining faces awaiting me, I thought I knew what to expect. But I was wrong. These three had been "deputized" by the entire class to come and escort me to a nearby cafe where the rest of the class was waiting. Using the excuse of a holiday, this class had decided to find out about me and the United States in an informal atmosphere. The youthful eagerness, the sincerity, and the endearing warmth that I felt on that occasion has remained one of my most cherished memories of teaching in Czechoslovakia.

Once classes get underway, the students have a very full load. Each class has a preset schedule for each of the five years that includes between 36 to 40 hours of classes each week! This also includes mandatory young communist classes and lectures in the evening by party bureaucrats. Knowing as I did my students' schedules, I often marveled at their ability to keep on top of their assignments--or do them at all.

Foreign lecturers are expected to teach what is known as "realia." This can best be described as the customs or the way of life in the United States or England or the small "c" in culture that one often doesn't find in textbooks. This is only part of our load. We are expected to teach the practical side of learning the language: the nuts and bolts of grammar, conversation, and reading while fitting our lessons into the topics (realia) that the students will be tested on. There is no set program for foreign lecturers. You make up your own, based on your expertise. For example, my own area of expertise was in teaching writing, so I set up a program for my five classes to teach the basics of rhetoric. As none of my students had ever been taught the elements of writing, this worked out well for everyone. There is also a critical shortage of textbooks, but I will discuss this subject in greater detail later.

Besides the regular students, there are two other kinds of students: those on an individual plan, and extra-mural or Saturday students. Those students on an individual plan will not be expected to come to class; yet, some plan will have to be established for them so that they can be given credit for the course. I had some students who I hadn't seen all semester come two weeks before the end of the term to ask what they needed to do to get credit for the course! This, of course, was a nightmare and quite outside the realm of my experience in teaching in American universities.

In addition to my five regular weekly classes, I also taught four Saturday classes (four hours each). These extra-mural classes paralleled the classes taught during the week; for example, I taught 1st, 2nd, 3rd year librarians and 2nd, 3rd year Slovak-English teachers during the week. On Saturdays I taught 1st, 2nd, and 3rd year librarians and 2nd year Slovak-English teachers. This paralleling is done for a purpose: if you are scheduled to test any of your regular classes for a particular semester, you must also test the extra-mural version of the class as well.

Teaching materials are scarce to nonexistent. Those that do exist are "approved." When I arrived in Bratislava, I had with me about 10 large cartons of books--sent through the courtesy of the USIA, the people who oversee the Fulbright program. These books had been provided free by the USIA, by my former university California State University Long Beach, and by Holt, Rinehart & Winston, the publishing company. As I was packing up to return home, the British lecturer asked me if he could borrow a set of books for his summer course. I said, "Of course, but you must return them for the next Fulbright lecturer in the fall." When the British lecturer returned from his summer vacation and teaching assignment, he found that all the books I had brought were gone. On further investigation, he was told that that the department chair had taken them away so that someone in the Party could look them over to make sure they were all right. To my knowledge, they have never been replaced.

In 1983 when I was in Bratislava, the university still did not have a Xerox machine, but it did have a machine to run stencils. Unfortunately, being used to the luxury of using the ubiquitous copier, I found making stencils tedious work. All stencils had to be left with a central office for copying, so I always had to count on at least four days to get my copies back. There were four copy machines in Bratislava, and I was told that one was a Xerox, but I never saw it. I always found these machines to be in need of some sort of repair whenever I wanted to use them--at least that is how I perversely remember them. Further, the machines reproduced copies badly, and they were quite expensive--@ .20 cents a page.

To complete the picture on students and the university system, a final word must be said on the university admissions' policy in Czechoslovakia. Students take a tough entrance exam to

obtain a place in an institution of higher learning, but once in the university, few fail. Some even seem to be "coddled" along. It is interesting to note the difference between the US system and the Czechoslovakian one: here we allow anyone a place in some form of institution of higher learning--if not a prestigious university, then a junior college or state university. But if the person doesn't work, we expect the person to "flunk out." In Czechoslovakia the reverse is true: very few--one might even say the elite--manage to obtain a place in a university, but those who do have little fear of being kicked out. And finally, no matter what their scores on entrance exams and university tests, children of today's aristocracy, the members of the Party, are given preferential treatment.

Part III: Observations on living in a totalitarian state.

One of my most interesting observations was of the Vietnamese. There were a few (very few) Vietnamese students enrolled at the university. Having taught in Southern California for the past seven years, I found myself observing the only Vietnamese student I had in my classes. For those readers not from Southern California, I can only explain my preoccupation with watching the Vietnamese in school and around Bratislava because of the high numbers of Indo-Chinese to be found in California and the subsequent crush in ESL classrooms around the state.

While in Bratislava, I had a chance to view the effects of the war in Indochina on an Eastern Bloc country: Vietnamese families were highly visible in Bratislava; they had been sent by their government to work at subsistence levels in factories to pay off Vietnam's enormous war debt to the Soviet Union. I often wondered on those blistery cold winter days in Bratislava how these people were faring--knowing as I knew that very large numbers of Vietnamese had moved to California after being settled in various regions of the US mainly because they hated the cold weather of those other areas so much. It was curious to note the general attitude of the Slovaks toward the Vietnamese (and I might add, the gypsies). Although I heard the US criticized on more than one occasion for our racial bigotry by those thinking themselves to be clean on that issue, the ugly spectre of racial prejudice against both Vietnamese and gypsies is, unfortunately, alive and well.

If there was an irony in the racial attitudes of some, I definitely felt there was an irony in the view by some of my students--the future "creme de la creme"--toward the worker. Let there be no doubt: the worker is held in esteem in socialist Czechoslovakia, but during one of my discussions on culture and marriage in the US vs. Cz., I sensed a general reluctance on the part of the females in my classes to associate with workers. Indeed some of my students went so far as to say they would never date or marry a worker--because workers were not only dirty, but smelly as well! In a clash between idealism and realism,

idealism would surely lose!

In this vein, I found an ironic discrepancy in the present, supposedly classless, society. Although everyone is presumed to be equal, there are in Czechoslovakia those who are more equal than others. Those who belong to the Party and are part of the bureaucratic makeup of the country have the power and the privileges. In a sense, the Czechoslovakians traded their old system of aristocratic class for one that is bureaucratic in nature.

However, that is not to say there is unhappiness over the socialist state. Socialism has greatly improved the lives of the many by instituting widespread education, universal suffrage (but only one candidate to vote for), free medical care and so on. The majority are better off under socialism than under the Austro-Hungarian Empire; the democracy that survived between the wars was too short a time span to argue one way or the other whether the redresses in people's rights would have developed the same way or not. The feeling in the country is pro-Socialist, but not pro-Soviet. There is a difference.

It is illegal to have foreign newspapers and magazines in the country--unless they have been approved. Consequently, the only information the people receive is what has been "approved." **Newsweek** and **Time** are banned. I was sent copies of **Newsweek** while there, and I would leave the issues in my office. They would be picked up, brought back, and picked up again--a little more worn each time. I never asked who was borrowing the copies--I didn't want to know. Likewise, radio news is strictly controlled by the simple fact that radios in the Eastern Bloc countries are on a different band from those in the West, so Western news is effectively blocked.

Foreign lecturers are well looked after, in every sense of the term. A faculty member is assigned to act as a mentor to help the lecturer adjust to the society, act as a translator with the police, and represent the lecturer with the Ministry of Education. In my case I was lucky to have someone who was caring, who had spent time at MIT, and who was intellectually stimulating and interesting to talk to.

My mentor took me to the police station to register within the first 48 hours for a residence cards. She had to write a biography of me in Slovak with the important requirement that it fill up all three pages of the form. I was later told that if all three pages allotted for the biography were not completed, my mentor would have had to redo the entire form. Each time I was to leave the country, the process of registering with the police, paying a tax to leave and return, asking permission from the Ministry of Education, and waiting for 10 days for the endless paperwork to be completed had to be repeated. Therefore, while it is not impossible or difficult to leave the country, it is tedious.

She, my mentor, also took me to meet the person in charge of foreign lecturers at the Ministry of Education who was a charming, endearing man. Unfortunately, he spoke no English, and I spoke no Slovak. After presenting my papers to him, my mentor negotiated my salary; I have to say that she really worked hard for me in trying to convince the Minister that I deserved the highest salary possible. In the end, he agreed and gave me 3800 Kcs a month (about \$380.00). The government then turned around and taxed me about 900 Kcs (\$90.00) as a single person.

My final stop was the **Dom skolskych stykov**, known affectionately by those of us who had a hard time pronouncing it as the **Dom**. The Dom is responsible for housing the foreign lecturers--for providing everything to fit out an apartment: for linens, irons, dishes, furniture and so on. They are also responsible for maintenance. It was dealing with these people that my translator/mentor proved invaluable.

When I said that foreign lecturers were well looked after in all senses of the term, I included in that the scrutiny by the secret police. When I first arrived in Bratislava, I was followed all the time. Being a novice at this, I can only believe that if I saw the men following me, I was meant to. After following me everywhere for a couple of weeks and seeing that I really was in Bratislava for the purpose of teaching at the university, they left me alone--mostly. My apartment and phone were bugged as well as my office at the university, but in a way all this made me feel extremely safe. I knew nothing could happen because I was being so thoughtfully watched! On the other hand, I have to say that my contact with the regular police (for visas) was always amicable, if not downright friendly. They in no way evoked the sinister image that their counterparts in the secret police did.

I have left a discussion of my relationship with the Slovaks for the last. When at work, the faculty at Comenius were a delight. When one considers that these people must make an effort every year to welcome new people, their willingness to help has to be admired. Considering the time that each foreign lecturer stays, it is really quite amazing that the faculty members can be so warm and giving year after year. Just as they begin to know us, it's time for us to leave, yet I and other Fulbrighters have always been warmly welcomed.

Unfortunately, away from the university, I always felt the ugly spectre of international politics and tension between the US and that most ardent supporter of the USSR, Czechoslovakia, to affect my relations with others. While I was most warmly welcomed at school, I was mostly left alone in my private life. I could not help but feel the secret state's unspoken interference in this realm. Of course, no matter where one goes, people are always busy with their own lives, but somehow I always felt a hesitancy on the part of others to become too friendly--one never knew what anticipated post might vanish or what "good" school for one's child might not materialize. The threat

was real.

I'm glad now that I went to Czechoslovakia. When I think about my time there, I think of the warmth and eagerness of my students, the helpful, caring faculty, and the beautiful country. I try to forget the burly, hostile border guards, their vicious watchdogs, and the omni-present secret police. My time there gave me an understanding of the people and the way of life under a totalitarian regime, and I can only hope that in some small way, I helped dispel the myth that all Americans are heartless, imperialistic brutes.

Jacqueline K. Neufeld
August 3, 1986